DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 175 CS 206 783

AUTHOR Thompson, Merle O'Rourke
TITLE Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper": Women, Society, Sanity.
PUB DATE Feb 82
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on English in the Two Year College (17th, Winston-Salem, NC, February 25-27, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Authors; *Autobiographies; Content Analysis; *Females; Feminism; Fiction; Influences; *Mental Disorders; Psychological Needs; *Short Stories
IDENTIFIERS *Gilman (Charlotte Perkins)

ABSTRACT

"The Yellow Wallpaper," by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, is a remarkable piece of history and sociology, as well as a feminist story concerning the search for self. Written in 1890, the story, which closely parallels the author's own life, vividly chronicles a woman's descent into madness. Charlotte married an artist after a lengthy courtship of conflicting emotions. After the birth of their child, Charlotte suffered from nervous exhaustion and a debilitating depression. She received the "rest cure" of a noted neurologist, extended bedrest and total inactivity, after which she was sent home and told to live as domestic a life as possible and "never touch pen, brush, or pencil as long as you live." Charlotte, who believed work was essential to personal dignity, came close to insanity after a month of domesticity and finally left her husband. "The Yellow Wallpaper" dramatically narrates what she knows would have happened to her had she not escaped from her husband and doctor. The insane narrator, kept in a room with no contacts or stimuli, tears off the yellow wallpaper to release the "woman" trapped between the layers, the narrator's "other" self. Charlotte wrote the story during the years she lived away from her husband and raised her daughter, at which time she suffered much social abuse. Eventually, she returned her daughter to her husband, remarried, and, free from all domestic chores, completed her best works of sociology, including "Women and Economics," a definitive work of the time. (HTH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED214175

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

+ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

CHARLOTTE PERKINS GILMAN'S "THE YELLOW WALLPAPER": WOMEN, SOCIETY, SANITY

by

Merle O'Rourke Thompson

Northern Virginia Community College
Annandale Campus

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Merle O'Rourke Thompson

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Adapted from a paper presented at
Southeast Regional Conference
English in the Two Year College
Winston-Salem, NC, 1982

CS206783

When several of the 1981 editions of freshman literature anthologies added "The Yellow Wallpaper," a short story by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, I realized that it was a story that was finally being accepted for universal reading.[1] It is a story for today's students. It is a gothic story; it is a remarkable piece of history and sociology; it is a feminist story; it is also a story concerning the search for self.

"The Yellow Wallpaper" chronicles a woman's descent into madness. Written in 1890, it first appeared in The New England Magazine and then later was reprinted in 1920 in Great American Modern Stories by William Dean Howells (who called it a story to "freeze our....blood."[2]) It was received as a horror story --a Poe-like Gothic grotesque. Horror writer H.P. Lovecraft called it one of the great "spectral tales" in American Literature.[3]

And Gothic Horror it is: a beautiful woman with a mysterious disease is trapped in a haunted house battling a man who personifies the evil that triumphs.

The first person narrator is a woman writer who is suffering from "a nervous complaint" that often prevents her from living a normal life, and especially from writing. She, her husband, and newborn baby have moved into a "colonial mansion, a hereditary estate...a haunted house...the height of romantic felicity."[4] Her kind physician husband John has brought her to this garden-enclosed country house for three months so that she might have the complete rest he knows will cure her "indefinable malady." Servants will care for the baby, lift all domestic chores from her, and prepare abundant meals. John gently

insists they together occupy the top floor nursery/classroom, which has barred windows, a bed nailed to the floor, and a torn, sickly yellow wallpaper. He laughs at his wife's aversion to the wallpaper, as he leaves the house daily for his work. She passes the days and nights without purpose, being refused anything deemed stimulating by the husband: either friends, work, or especially pen and paper.

With no other sense stimulation, she becomes obsessed by the wallpaper. The squiggly lines are "committing suicide," surrounding "bulbous eyes" that stare at her. Eventually she observes that there are really two layers of paper with a woman trapped between the layers. By day the prisoner creeps all over the house, garden, and countryside, but at night she is again imprisoned behind the wallpaper keeping the narrator awake. Determining to release the woman, the narrator locks herself in and begins tearing at the wallpaper.

At last the loving husband breaks into the room and finds her irredeemably mad, creeping about on all fours. She says, "I've got out at last. . . .and I've pulled off most of the paper, so you can't put me back." He faints from the horror.

Circumstances surrounding the story give a vivid picture of nineteenth century society. In the 1890's the story was condemned by family moralists who could not see how anyone could get pleasure from it because many "lives have been touched by this dread disease." It was also thought to be perilous reading for anyone whose life was "a struggle against an heredity of mental derangement."[5]

There had never before been so detailed an account of madness in fiction. Medical doctors wrote to the author about the correctness of this vivid portrayal of incipient insanity.

It was a realistic account, for Charlotte Perkins Gilman had, as she said in response to medical queries, "been as far as one could go [into madness] and get back."[6]

Charlotte Anna Perkins was born in Hartford, Connecticut, July 3, 1860, the daughter of Frederick Beecher Perkins, grandson of the famous Lyman Beecher. Thus Charlotte was the grand neice of Henry Ward Beecher, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and Catherine Beecher. Frederick Perkins, a noted intellectual, left his wife and children soon after Charlotte's birth and thereafter provided little support. Charlotte and her older brother Tom were raised by their mother Mary Fitch Westcott, in poverty and isolation, moving often into homes of the Beecher relatives, sharing a bitter and lonely life.

Charlotte Perkins broke out of that lonely life briefly when she got the Beecher relatives to prevail on her mother for permission to attend the Rhode Island School of Design to be prepared for work. All her life Charlotte Perkins would consider "world work" necessary for personal dignity. She earned her living as a young woman by designing greeting cards, teaching art, and tutoring children.

In her early twenties, she led a busy life of work, physical exercise, and vigorous self discipline (proudly identifying with the Beecher New England heritage). Her autobiography reads like parts of Benjamin Franklin's, displaying hourly agendas of self denial. Nevertheless she had time for a varied social life in Providence, Rhode Island, having several men and women friends; but she avoided romantic entanglements until meeting Charles Walter Stetson, a local artist who, according to Ann Lane, looked like "a combination of Byron and Brando."[7]

In her autobiography Charlotte Perkins remarks that their courtship was a period of conflicting emotions: She felt "real pleasure of association with a noble soul, and one who read and studied and cared for real things," plus "the natural force of sex attraction between two lonely young people." But also "...bitter revulsion, of desperate efforts to regain the dispassionate poise." She felt that for her "the nature of life before her forbade marriage, that she ought to "forego the more intimate personal happiness for complete devotion to ... work."[8] However, after two "terrible years" she agreed to marry Stetson in May 1884.

She plunged into domesticity with her usual mixture of diligence, efficiency, and rebellion. She performed household tasks, but not on the rigorous times and day schedule dictated by New England custom. She learned to cook by scientific experiment, not by cookbooks. She shopped carefully and decorated their small apartment with frugality. But the bouts of depression that had often palgued her during the courtship year increased seriously after marriage.

Walter was happy, but Charlotte, soon pregnant, suffered a steady loss of strength. She says that her "steady cheerfulness, the strong, tireless spirit sank away... A sort of gray fog drifted across [her] mind, a cloud that grew and darkened."[9] Often she felt sick and stayed in bed all day. Assuming it was the pregnancy, Walter and her family rallied around. In her autobiography she says that Walter was always kind and helpful. He cooked, and cleaned, and cared for her physically.

On March 23, 1885, her daughter Katherine Beecher Stetson was born. Charlotte was plunged into "an extreme of nervous exhaustion

which no one observed or understood."[10] Her symptoms got steadily worse. Even with the help of a servant, she "lay all day on the lounge and cried."[11]

Charlotte says it was a new disease called "nervous prostration," a new name for laziness. She was told to "use her will," "force happiness into .... life," "take an agreeable book to bed," "get up and do something" (this from her mother). But Charlotte says the disorder involved a "growing melancholia..." consisting of every painful mental sensation, shame, fear, remorse, a blind oppressive confusion, utter weakness, a steady brain ache that [filled] the conscious mind with crowding images of distress. She was unable to read, unable to dust a table, "so weak that the knife and fork sank" from her hands.[12]

She nursed the baby for five months and felt only pain --even motherhood brought no joy. Finally a doctor suggested she go away. After several months with friends in Pasadena California, where she regained all her strength and happiness, she returned home to Rhode Island when the baby Katherine was one year old.

Within a month she was as sick as before leaving. Through the Stetson family connections she was referred to the famous Philadelphia neurologist Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell for his well-known "rest cure."

That she submitted to this doctor's care is indicative of her conflict. Her husband's family arranged it. But Charlotte was certainly aquainted with her aunt Catherine Beecher's pioneer work on women's hygiene. During the 1850's Catherine Beecher had crusaded with statistics on women's diseases and cures, against ineffective medical treatment and suspicious motives of male physicians treating women patients.[13]

During the nineteenth century, medical society was little removed from the witch-doctor stage. There was little formal medical education, even toward the end of the century. In medical view, all women's ailments arose from the simple fact that women had uteruses. The woman suffering a prolapsed uterus from too much childbearing, cancer, any menstrual difficulty, as well as the woman with headaches or backaches or an irritable disposition could be subjected to what came to be called "local treatment" --repeated leechings, injections, and cauterizations of the uterus (remember, even for a headache).[14]

Luckily for Charlotte this "local treatment" had been largely dropped by the 1880's when she suffered her collapse. Uterine cauterization was being dismissed as a relic of a barbaric past, and led by Weir Mitchell, doctors were administering a more humane cure.

S. Weir Mitchell (1829-1914) rates several pages in medical history texts. He achieved a two-year college degree from Jefferson Medical College in 1850. He became a researcher when America had no laboratories. He initiated the founding of several scientific societies so that there could be an interchange of scientific ideas. In ten years he published twenty-two important medical works. His study of nerve injuries from gun-shot wounds during the Civil War was actively studied through World War II. After the war, his extensive work on nerves had far reaching implications for the new field of neurology of which he was a founder. For example, he was the first to call attention to the fact that headaches can be caused by eye strain and uncorrected vision defects. But he was most popularly known as the originator in the 1870's of the rest and fattening cures, described in a pamphlet Fat and Blood (1877), which was translated into most European languages.[15]

The rest and fattening cure dictated just what its name implies: Extended bed rest, near total inactivity, excessive feeding, and passive exercises through massage and electricity. For some six weeks the patient was removed from her home, confined to bed, fed to gain weight daily, and permitted no activity even or especially reading.[16] Removal from home was necessary to avoid all possibilities of selfish, fashionable invalidism. The patient was allowed to see no one except the doctor or perhaps a hired nurse.

It is easy enough to dismiss this treatment and its predecessor as reflecting primitive medicine, and it's even easier today to see it as the reflecting familiar feminist theory of conspiracy among men against women. Both views have some validity. Because, of course, the treatments did not cure, except perhaps where cauterization may have helped uterine infections. And there is every evidence that the treatments only aggravated symptoms. But the "rest cure" was widely acclaimed, and many famous women such as Edith Wharton and Jane Addams were treated by Mitchell. William Dean Howells had even placed his daughter Winifred into Mitchell's sanitarium where she died in 1889, one year before Howell's sponsored publication of "The Yellow Wall-paper."[17]

Charlotte submitted herself to Weir Mitchell despite his well known dislike for Beecher women. (He had treated two of them, intransigient cases, and he probably felt included in Catherine Beecher's rantings about the medical profession). Charlotte aggravated him by sending ahead a complete synopsis of her case. He saw such presumption as nervous evidence of her overworked brain, which caused the disease. It "proved self-conceit"[18] He diagnosed hysteria -- the classical

meaning of the term. After a month he pronounced her cured -- (anybody would feel better after such agreeable treatment, said Charlotte) and sent her home with the prescription (unbelievable to modern ears) to her: "live as domestic a life as possible. Have your child with you as much as possible. Lie down an hour after each meal. Have but two hours intellectual life a day. And never touch pen, brush, or pencil, as long as you live."[19]

After following the directions for nearly a month Charlotte says she came perilously close to losing her mind. "Mental torment so bad... I would sit blankly moving my head side to side." "I made a rag baby, hung it on a doorknob, and played with it. I would crawl into remote closets and under beds --to hide from the grinding pressure of that profound distress."[20]

Reading Charlotte's life in her autobiography and the biography recently published by Mary Hill, a reader has to remark at her courage to have made the decision to "get out," not through madness as her fictional character does, but through marital separation. In 1887, she took her baby and moved away from Charles Stetson to Pasadena. She knew the social isolation she would suffer (though it was more difficult than expected but any pain was preferrable to the ultimate loss. She said it was the choice "between going, sane, and staying insane.")[21]

"The Yellow Wallpaper" is obviously autobiographical. Charlotte dramatically narrates what she knows would have happened to her had she not escaped her husband and doctor. In an afterward she says she wrote it for Mitchell to persuade him to change the treatment. Though he never replied to her letter sending the story to him, she

heard later that he had changed his treatment after reading her story.

The story disappeared from print after the 1920's, as most of Charlotte's writings did, until 1973 when it was rediscovered and printed under separate cover by the Feminist Press. Then it was seen as a feminist story: A wife, probably suffering from post-partem depression, becomes the jailed victim of a patriarchy who under the guise of kindness chauvinistically prescribes as treatment the very conditions that have provoked the breakdown --"isolation, inactivity, submission of the will, and surrender of all creative impulse save that directed to domesticity and motherhood."[22] The disease is the possible threat of woman usurping the male role. The pen and brush are obvious inappropriate phallic symbols. The cure is a return to the submissive female role.

It has been read as one of the many stories of collusion between husbands and doctors, familiar stories to feminists, such as those of Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre, of Virginia Woolf, and of Zelda Fitzgerald. In "The Yellow Wallpaper," Weir Mitchell is mentioned by name as the ultimate threat from the husband/physician if the wife doesn't "pick up faster." For Charlotte Perkins Gilman as for many contemporary feminists, the famous psychiatrist is the personification of a system that approves tyranny.

The feminist interpretation, based as it is on a view of women oppressed by men, is supported by psychiatric theory. Thomas Szasz, defines madness as the result of a conflict between the oppressor and the oppressed.[23] The narrator of "The Yellow Wallpaper" surely feels oppressed by John. She can't have the room she wants. He chooses the

room, a jailer's room. He dictates the basics of her life -- shelter, food, activity, and thoughts. Open expression of rage is dangerous. Throughout the story she says she dare not tell John that she feels his opinions are wrongheaded. She can write her feelings because "it is only dead paper." She makes snide remarks about his kindness, feeling it as patronizing. But she denies her own opinions and tries to "get well."

It is tempting to keep the story in the feminist mold, but it also reads as a metaphoric search for the potent self. Such a search is a human condition that has no gender. The search produces conflict between the individual's needs and society's needs. Charlotte Perkins Gilman wrote of a female, but the rules apply to all:

1. Society decides what is right;
2. Society, being more powerful, dictates individual submission;
3. Defiance will be punished by society;
4. Society may label you mad;
5. Escape is nearly impossible;
6. Conformity is necessary for survival.

Society appoints its representatives. It has given doctors magical powers to define reality for the weak who cannot withstand pressure to accept the definition. All patients learn that if they want to "get out" (or switch doctors) they must submit to the doctor and develop the symptoms he wants.

For most people, acceptance of society's role provides comfort, security, and health. However, for others, it is acceptance of society's role that causes, not cures their problems. "The Yellow Wallpaper" narrator is defying society's definition of what is right for her: she wants to write, not take care of the house, the food, or the baby. Conflict between her needs and society's has caused her "nervous condition."

Forcing her submission to society's needs insures increasing madness. Because the conflict involves sexual definition, the madness is aggravated. Virginia Woolf emphasized the importance of this process in Mrs. Dalloway when she created Septimus Smith, a sensitive man, who goes mad, and Miss Kilman, an aggressive woman, who is dotty.[24]

Marriage, of course, as an institution of society, is a well-known battleground for individual power struggles. The closing passage of "The Yellow Wallpaper" shows the insane narrator (still a reliable one too) triumphantly saying of her husband when he finds her crawling around, "Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time!" It's hard for the reader not to feel triumph! The underdog has won against the villian.

Modern psychiatrists such as R.D. Laing have accused the claustrophic family of contributing overwhelming conflict for the individual. Rather than providing nurure, the family causes psychosis. The narrator's problem is made worse by the fact that her brother, also a doctor, agrees with John --collusion now between husband, psychiatrist, and one's own male relatives. (Later, when tearing off the paper, she says it's awful, it sticks like a brother). John's sister, who comes to help, spies on her --female family members are no help either. R.D. Laing would approve of Gilman's withdrawal from the family. And he would recognize her alter-ego's withdrawal from the world through insanity to be a reasonable method of self-preservation.[25]

Marriage and family intrude on individual privacy, driving the person to create his/her own space. Certainly our narrator would prefer to have the pretty small ground floor room of her own, but it's

big enough only for one person -- so it's not allowed. Alone in the big attic room, she is more frustrated by the immobile furniture and her inability to escape the wallpaper, or sister on the stairs, or John's nightly return. She can make the private escape into madness only when John's work takes him away overnight.

This sense of a lost private self produces unbearable isolation, a mental torture exacerbated because no one understands; in fact no one even listens. Doctors cling to their own logic and don't listen to the patient. It's a truism that men and women don't understand each other's logic, and that husbands don't listen to wives. John, a doctor and husband, "laughs," (the narrator says "one expects that in marriage") and "scoffs" at her, tells her she's just feeling "a draught" and closes the window, "knows there is no reason to suffer and that is enough for him," and "thinks it all absurd." In panic, the narrator seeks revenge. In retrospect, one wonders at Charlotte's sending her story to Dr. Mitchell, and her subsequent appreciation of the word that he had changed his treatment. Successful revenge against a doctor's treatment is a patient's dream -- the final attempt at ultimate understanding.

Alienation from oneself is ruinous for women because their search is for the nurturing mother. Barbara Rigney has pointed out that mothers withhold nurturing from their female babies knowing they will have to mature into a nurtureless world.[26] The other self that Gilman's narrator is searching for is the mother within herself. Women's recognition that they must mother themselves is experienced as a double loss. Motherhood dramatizes this need for mothering oneself, tripling the sense of loss. When we meet the heroine, she is a new wife and a

new mother. Her male child "is a dear baby" but she can't stand to hold him. The conflict thus produced must be obliterated through madness.

A deep sense of self is the prime ingredient for a writer. Creative work needs sustained effort, and self-centered undivided attention to come to fruition. Tillie Olsen in her essay "Silences" points out that many writers experience "foreground silences," writing that never appears due to lack of circumstances and encouragement.[27] Our narrator in "The Yellow Wallpaper" is compelled to write to rid herself of "her fancies" but then feels exhausted from that effort to delve into self. Her circumstances are not conducive to creativity, and since she must do it "on the sly" she is being thwarted not encouraged. "The Yellow Wallpaper" gives the lie to the old "moldy theory" that women, having the ability to create babies have no need to create ideas. There is a creative self in both men and women beyond the reproductive self.

Clearly the woman imprisoned behind the wallpaper is the narrator's "other self." In an afterward to the 1973 edition, Elaine Hedges remarks that when the heroine says she is "free of Jane" the reader must speculate about the identity of Jane who has not previously been mentioned. Hedges thinks the narrator may be referring to her other self as defined by society.[28] It seems more probable that Jane is John's sister who, as "a perfect and enthusiastic housekeeper...who hopes for no better profession" has shared John's wardenship over her. Gilman's story is expertly crafted, but there is no indication in her autobiography, letters, or diary that she meant to deal with dual identity.[29]

Charlotte wrote the story during the five years she lived in Pasadena, defying society by raising Katherine alone, supporting herself by writing, lecturing, and tutoring. During this time she was subjected to all manner of social abuse including the painful epithet "unnatural mother."

Finally Charlotte gave her daughter to Walter and his second wife (Charlotte's best friend Grace Channing) to raise. For this she was villified by the press on both coasts. For fifteen years she remained alienated and homeless, supporting herself as a travelling lecturer, constantly battling the weakness she felt was a remnant of her mental breakdown.

At age 40 Charlotte Perkins married her cousin Houghton Gilman and settled down in a kitchenless house, going for meals to a boarding house. Free of domestic chores she completed her best works of sociology including Women and Economics, a definitive work of the time.

Gilman's 19th Century recommendations for achieving personal sanity read well for today's students:

--resist the ideas of those who control you
--leave the family, dependent on sex and blood
--create new "families" for society
--perform some "world work"
--act, don't just react, to the people in your life,

Endnotes

[1] "The Yellow Wallpaper" appears in Sylvan Barnet, Morton Berman, and William Burto, An Introduction to Literature(Boston: Little,Brown and Company, 1981) and other anthologies.

[2] William Dean Howells, ed., The Great American Modern Stories(New York: Boni and Liveright, 1920), p. vii.

[3] H.P. Lovecraft quoted in Ann J. Lane, ed., The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader(New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. xvii.

[4] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper," The Charlotte Perkins Gilman Reader ed. Ann J. Lane(New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), p. 3. All quotations are taken from this edition.

[5] Charlotte Perkins Gilman, The Living of Charlotte Perkins Gilman: An Autobiography(New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 120.

[6] Living, p. 121.

[7] Lane, p. xi.

[8] Living, p. 83.

[9] Living, p. 88.

[10] Living, p. 89.

[11] Living, p. 89.

[12] Living, pp. 90-91.

[13] Ann Douglas Wood, "The Fashionable Diseases: Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth Century America," The Journal of Interdisciplinary History IV (Summer, 1973), pp. 25-52.

[14] Wood, p. 30.

[15] Henry E. Sigerist, American Medicine, trans. Hildegard Nagel (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1934), p. 119.

[16] Wood, p. 31.

[17] Cleanth Brooks and others, American Literature: The Makers and The Making (New York: St. Martins Press, 1973), II, p. 1349.

[18] Living, p. 95.

[19] Living, p. 96.

[20] Living, p. 96.

[21] Living, p. 97.

[22] Millicent Bell, "Pioneer," New York Review of Books, 17 Apr. 1980, pp. 10-14.

[23] Thomas SZasz quoted in Phyllis Chesler, Women and Madness(Garden City New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1972), p. 101.

[24] Barbara Hill Rigney, Madness and Sexual Politics in the Feminist Novel (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), p. 46.

[25] Rigney, p. 47.

[26] Rigney, p. 11.

[27] Tillie Olsen, "Silences" in Susan Koppelman Cornillon, ed. Images of Women in Fiction: Feminist Perspectives, rev. ed. (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green University, Popular Press, 1973), pp. 97-112.

[28] Elaine R. Hedges, "Afterword," The Yellow Wallpaper by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (Old Westbury New York: The Feminist Press, 1973), p. 63.

[29] Mary A. Hill, Charlotte Perkins Gilman: The Making of A Radical Feminist: 1860-1896(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1980)